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Comparative Study of
Goethe's
Goetz von Berlichingen
and
Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF GOETHE'S GOETZ VON BERLICHINGEN
and
KLEIST'S MICHAEL KOHLHAAS

BY

FRED JOHN SMITH, A. B.,
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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

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B I B L I O G R A P H Y

HEINE'S PROSA

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KLEIST'S SÄMTLICHE WERKE

WEISENFEL'S GOETHE IN STURM UND DRANG

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GOETHE'S "GÖTZ VON BERLICHINGEN"

and

KLEIST'S "MICHAEL KOHLHAAS"

It is the object of this thesis to show the trend and development of a small part of German literature, during the early manhood of Goethe and Kleist. Almost a generation separated the periods of the publication of the two works in question, yet it is not a distortion of facts, as they appear at this distance of time, to regard both works as representative of the influence of the Sturm und Drang movement.

The origin of the Sturm und Drang movement is suggested in a general though cursory survey of the conditions which affected the literature of the time.

The attempt is made to indicate the reflective influence of the movement upon Goethe and Kleist as shown by a comparison of their respective works, Götz von Berlichingen and Michael Kohlhaas.

No great political or intellectual revolution is of sudden origin. Slumbering fires long herald the time of action, but it is customary to fix the period of the beginnings of the result of long fermentation preceding this movement as about that of Goethe's earliest writing.

The impossibility of the application of much of the time-worn metaphysical philosophy of the schools to the development on natural lines of the individual was at the basis of the movement. Something

was needed to release the mind from iron-bound conventions which cloaked tyranny and forbade liberty of thought as well as action.

There are noble names which paved the way, but which can not be held responsible for the extravagances which distinguish the followers of those who sought liberty and light in ways and means which made future generations smile.

Klopstock and Herder did their share rationally to train restless youth to more natural methods of thought. Rousseau's influence no doubt aided in the intellectual revival of a nation, struggling under most galling political conditions and hampered by the narrowest religious bigotry.

At the time when Goethe first went to Strassburg in 1770 the young poets of the movement were active in the neighborhood of the German universities, in expressing much of the extravagance which affected individual life. Goethe returned more German than when he entered the Alsatian school, but brought back with him a most ardent admiration for Shakspeare.

An appreciation of Shakspeare was a shibboleth of the new school. The liberal and enlightened clergy, who did not desire to see the authority of the church entirely defied, endeavored to stem the tide by directing the brightest of the youthful spirits to a study of the Bible as a lesson in ethics and literature, not to be confounded with church dogma or discipline.

Goethe owes not a small share of his training on this line at this time to Herder.

But there still remained, after all efforts to restrain the

reckless and impatient were useless, the absolute truth of the exasperation of the most oppressive civil restrictions, which pointed to but one logical method of inaugurating a reform, to accomplish the release of the individual from the thralldom of ignorance.

To tear down is as necessary to reform as to build up, and much of the exaggerated sentimentalism which was characteristic of the movement has caused later generations to smile. Nevertheless the enlightened truths at the core of the movement must always secure the respect of the psychological student of history.

The loftiest standards were set up as to the motives which should govern life; the war upon oppressive conventions was sometimes confounded with a war upon the ethics controlling the Christian world; every barrier to liberty of thought was denounced; authority of any kind was declared a tyranny; the most lawless glorification of primitive, uncorrupted nature, of passion, of genius was the watchword of the hour. Fortunately for society at large the influence of these first extravagances did not reach far. Time, which modifies all things softened the asperities and brightened the truths which produced the growth of the movement.

Naturally, such attacks upon manners, moral and religion had an immediate influence upon the literature of the day. The universities became the hot beds of discursive eloquence upon human responsibility and the relation of man to nature. Coteries of the ardent spirits of intellectual centers took it upon themselves to practise some of these radical reforms, and found themselves duly held amenable to the local statutes.

After a while there was a revulsion, an ardent return to pure

classicism set in, the romantic school made its way. Many crude poems, much objectionable literature disappeared, but the movement had had a distinct, permanent influence for good upon the minds of men. "Die Leiden des jungen Werthers" and "Götz von Berlichingen" show among all of the works of Goethe the most direct relation to the characteristic features of the Sturm und Drang movement.

They glow with compassionate zeal for the woes, real or affected of humanity; they are filled with the most ardent protest against all conventional law, which according to the new gospel was an outrage upon the individual, and, in fact, against everything in the way of the desires of an untrained nature. But at the same time a ruthless picture of the corruption of the time and of society at large was unfolded. The banner of the revolution was set up.

Goethe made his first attempt in ["]Götz von Berlichingen to revive, or rather to rehabilitate, the German drama.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the drama had almost disappeared from current literature. It was at least one hundred years behind the drama in England. Goethe appears to have made a study of such plays of Shakespeare as were within his reach. France seems to have had no influence upon conditions in Germany.

The strolling players, who represented about all there was of the mimic life of the stage, were in the habit of adjusting such plays as came into their hands to the necessities of the hour. There is a fairly well authenticated story that Hamlet was first made known to Germany about the middle of the eighteenth century in this garbled fashion.

It can scarcely be claimed that Goethe did more at this period than his small share toward the creation of the beginnings of German dramatic literature, but he at least set up a higher ideal in his first crude presentation of Götz von Berlichingen than was then current in the extravagant, blood-thirsty drama of his day.

The story of Götz von Berlichingen, a robber knight, the last of the ancient order of knighthood, attracted the attention of Goethe and of his sister, Cornelia, who, at this early period of his life largely influence his literary attempts at composition.

As a literary work the first edition was defective, but it became popular, as his position at court secured him a publisher, At a later time he re-wrote it, eliminating the crudities of its earlier composition.

In this drama Götz believes in what he considers primary law in its relation to human rights. He endeavors to reconcile the new with the old order of things by continuing to fight out his own and other people's quarrels.

As a man he is singularly faithful and upright, with a profound faith in the honor of his fellowmen - the same sort of faith which the advocates of the new movement were endeavoring to teach the later century.

He is surrounded by a world of treachery, falsehood and wrong of every sort. There is no courage in the hearts of the oppressed peasantry and no possibility of rousing an aspiring emotion.

But, according to his lights, he is a reformer and is imbued with the fanatic faith and zeal of the class. No disaster daunts him or destroys his belief in ultimate victory. It is singular how in all the hurly-burly of dramatic situation Goethe flung to the breeze the banner of the revolution, which this work and many another from less gifted pen set afloat.

It was the destiny of Goethe to enlighten and reform his people to bring about this new era of an enlightened individualism and a faith in nature. This was a watchword of the hour and it required much mystical translation to enlighten the German mind as to its meaning. There are limitations to human knowledge and it is difficult for a rational mind of this generation to grasp the true value of much of the literature of this epoch. Yet it is undeniable that the drama under consideration expresses faithfully a characteristic feature of the time.

Time passed on and a new author presented to the world a new story, not in dramatic form, based on the same theories of duty to oneself, to humanity at large and of hope in the future.

Kleist belonged to a younger generation, whose thirst for liberty was sharpened by the passion for revenge. In Michael Kohlhaas we see the same aspiration for justice, but it is relentless and if not gratified will be revenged. It is the spirit which was soon to bring the entire nation into the field for the preservation of a national life.

Kleist was over twenty years of age before he became an earnest student. It is not singular that the realm of pure

ethics was distasteful to him. The philosophy of the schools with its abstruse attempts to define human responsibility irritated him. The narrow field of journalism at that period soon wearied him by its exasperating limitations. He entered the army and went through the Austrian campaign against Napoleon. He began to write again, but he was full of reproaches for his countrymen for their lack of patriotism. Under these circumstances it is not singular that his writings and his temperament were peculiarly tragic. Neither the public nor his own family had any sympathy with his work. Goethe, who by this time had returned to a study of the classics, disliked him exceedingly. Yet it seemed beyond question that he was a student of Shakspeare. His first work seemed to have been largely drawn from Romeo and Juliet, yet it had but a limited circle of admirers.

For such a man the time came when he wrote for the hour, and Michael Kohlhaas saw the light. Of a singularly emphatic and rugged style, the story soon attracted public attention. The character of the peasant, forced by circumstances to become a rebel, belongs to the same type of man as ["]Gotz von Berlichingen. The same burning sense of wrong and injustice, the same desire to punish the oppressor pervades them both, though there is more of the personal element apparent in Michael.

But Kleist was not fairly judged until years after his death. Goethe's wonderful gift for accurate delineation of the motives which inspire human action and his superior knowledge made him a more able, more faithful exponent of the conditions of the sixteenth century. Yet it is not inaccurate to trace side by

side the similarities of structure, of motive and of character of the two works.

Kohlhaas becomes a rebel because he resents the prostitution of justice; he becomes a criminal because he seeks to punish offenses against himself, which would undoubtedly be practised against others. But he is morose and defiant and even fails to rouse the sympathy the merits of his character and the tragedy of his fate deserve. This is the result of the saturnine temperament of his creator.

Goethe, on the other hand, takes a common robber and makes him a hero. It was the result of a less pessimistic view of human nature as well as the larger field of action.

It is necessary to outline the plot of each story - of the drama and the tale.

Götz is the last of the old order of knighthood. He had stood for the reformation and had shown gallantry and generosity during the Peasants' war. It was the era of the attempt of the centralization of power on the part of the petty prince and potentate, and of the struggle of the remnants of the ancient knighthood to preserve the vassal system. Between the two the common herd would be ground to powder.

The first scene depicts the loyalty of the peasantry to Götz. He meets a monk in the forest, who thanks God that he has been permitted to see a man whom the princes hate, and toward whom the oppressed turn.

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Götz returns home, taking with him Weislingen, formerly a friend, now a prisoner and won over by the bishop. Political

conditions are defined in the scene and it is learned that Götz has been reported to the Emperor as a traitor.

The scene changes to the Bishop's palace, where Adelaide, a lady of the court appears. Weislingen is reported as captured. Next we learn that Weislingen has changed front again; has become one of Götz' troop. He is also betrothed to Götz' sister. A messenger reaches him with the order for his return to court. In short, he is enticed to return through strategy. Götz does not believe in Weislingen's treachery, being a man true to his friends and his cause himself, and is not easily convinced though his own messenger brings him the information. Götz advises a band of peasants to present their grievance to the Emperor.

In the third act the Emperor discusses with Weislingen the unsettled affairs of state. Weislingen advises the execution of Götz and other rebel leaders, or rather of those who represent the desire for justice.

The Emperor's forces receive orders to capture Götz, but they are not anxious to do this. They admire his courage and appreciate his integrity of character. Götz wins a powerful friend and in an encounter is victorious. A second and third battle leaves him in the ascendant though his following is reduced to a mere handful.

His motto is "Liberty forever", and he will die content if future generations are blessed with freedom from the thralls that bind them. He is taken prisoner in defending his own home,

and is brought to trial. He firmly maintains that he is not fighting the Emperor, but for the very centralization for which the Emperor should stand. At a critical moment Sickingen, a peasant leader, rescues him. Sickingen has married the sister of Götzt, formerly betrothed to Weislingen. Götzt is pardoned, but charged to cease his restless rebellion.

The last act represents the Peasants' war and in the midst of tumult Götzt becomes their leader. It all ends in defeat and the capture and imprisonment of Götzt. Robbed of liberty, property and good name he does not care to live, though pardoned, and dies leaving the state in great confusion. But the play stands for the righteous struggle for justice and civil and religious liberty.

In Kleist's story of Michael Kohlhaas the same revolutionary spirit prevails. But a generation has elapsed; political conditions are rapidly approaching the crisis, which finally roused all Germany to the necessity for national unity to defeat the ambitious designs of Napoleon. The writer makes a different use of his material. The tone of literature has changed and the germ of righteousness at the core of Sturm und Drang has produced its legitimate result. Michael not only insists upon his rights, but will have revenge if these rights are not recognized.

The scene is laid in the sixteenth century, when the burgher class, once most powerful and holding the purse strings, has been corrupted by its degradation into a servile, timid crowd of court officials.

Debarred from active participation in public life, hemmed in by an environment maddening in its limitations, and provoked beyond endurance by the haughty oppression of the ruling class, Kohlhaas rises in rebellion. He becomes amenable to the law and a criminal in his endeavor to secure justice for himself and his fellow sufferers. This common place horse-dealer, with his lofty and noble ideals is too strongly imbued with the spirit of justice to consent to its prostitution, no matter how insidiously the effort may be made. He believes firmly in the ultimate victory of right over wrong, and this faith gives him patience in his first encounter with Baron von Tronka.

As a peaceful, law-abiding citizen he is taking his horses to a neighboring market, when he is set upon, his horses seized and he is contemptuously dismissed. He humbly goes his way, pondering over the event as the result of the defective order of this world. After an annoying and disastrous delay he proves his right to his property. He recovers the horses to find them useless from abuse and neglect. He invokes the law for redress, but the law is construed in favor of the law-breaker and he has no other legal remedy. He resigns himself to his fate; he consoles himself with the reflection that he has learned his own place in the world. With solemnity and deliberation he makes his arrangements to settle his account with the world himself. He buries his faithful wife, who died as a result of her efforts to redress his wrongs. With his young child in his arms, he turns from her grave and pulls himself together to consider the business of revenge, for should the evil-doer escape punishment even in this world?

After the whole country has felt the horrors of civil war, the offending Baron is punished and Kohlhaas' wrongs have been avenged. Kohlhaas dies joyfully as a rebel; right has prevailed and God is in the world.

But Götz dies disheartened with all faith in the possibility of rousing patriotism or courage in the hearts of the people vanishing before his eyes. Götz fought for the preservation of what he conceived to be the rights of a class; with the extinction of the free knight he did not believe that justice could be assured the oppressed lower class of peasantry through the centralization of power, though he would stand by the Emperor and against the commercial class, the newly developed power in the land, whose purse strings held even potentates in awe.

Michael Kohlhaas had found that the oppressor must be punished for his iniquity, for the preservation of society at large. Does it seem fair to author or to his creation to ascribe revenge, personal revenge, as the only motive of action? Is not Michael Kohlhaas the more enlightened of the two men? He has proven that the human rights of the individual can not be abridged without swift punishment.

Goethe's attitude toward his own creation seemed for a time almost apologetic. The drama was hailed as the beginning of an era of regeneration of the stage, but it is not the least of Goethe's merits, at an age when he might easily have had his head turned by public adulation, that he appears to have been aware of the defects of construction and logical sequence. Later he repaired these errors to a great degree.

Kleist seems to have used whatever material came to hand as suggestive of names, minor incident or color, hence it is customary by the precisianist to direct attention to the similarity to those found in ["]Gotz. It was an age when these minor matters were transferred bodily to new matter. It was a species of padding allowable at that time. There is a similar incident of treachery and deceit in both works, which in both cases leads to disaster. It is a logical scene and incident of every work were war plays any part.

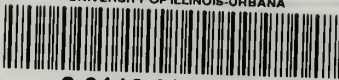
In all the literature of the age superstition plays its part; naturally it appears in both these works. The ghost walks abroad with similar effect upon the victim of the visitation. But these two men wrote with an object not much beyond the portrayal of a character exemplifying the struggles of a class, suffering under great misfortune and disaster.

Kleist does not appear to have striven after originality in the delineation of his female characters. The similarity of character, even of names in the two works would lead one to but one conclusion: both authors were young men, with but a limited knowledge of the nature of women. Conventional ideas were accepted; we see as a result the most commonplace of types of women represented. Possibly in the new order of things woman was not counted, except as she might minister to the comfort of man. In the end, at the period of the height of the work of the brilliant writers of the romantic epoch of German literature, it was Schiller, not Goethe, who gave the world the picture of the greatest women.





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